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ABSTRACT

School systems have long recognized the need for public support and participation, but now many districts are renewing their commitment to strengthen the ties with their communities. To build community support for schools that facilitates student achievement, school boards are developing communication strategies that routinely reach diverse community groups. This process is called public engagement. This digest examines how public engagement can foster student achievement, how school boards and administrators can facilitate the public-engagement process, and how school leaders can solicit enduring support from stakeholders. Public engagement can promote student achievement through the collaboration of supportive parents. It can also help the entire community by identifying social and health factors that interfere with learning, such as teen pregnancy, inadequate nutrition, and lack of health care. School boards and principals are in position to play key roles in involving families with their children's academic activities in meeting educational standards. Involved families can also effectively advocate for schools with the general public. Five methods that help school boards and administrators engage the public are focus groups, telephone polling, public meetings, e-mail, and study circles. (Contains 11 references.) (RT)

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Engaging the Community To Support Student Achievement

By Chris Cunningham

School systems have long recognized the need for public support and participation, but now many districts are renewing their commitment to strengthen the ties with their communities. More than ever, school districts realize they are dependent on community support to meet mandated state and national performance standards, develop innovative programs, and secure financial resources.

To build lasting community support for schools that facilitates student achievement, school boards are developing communication strategies that routinely reach diverse community groups. The process of building such partnerships, called *public engagement*, is ongoing, two-way communication between a school district and the community it serves (Resnick 2000).

This Digest examines how public engagement can foster student achievement, how school boards and administrators can facilitate the public-engagement process, and how school leaders can solicit enduring support from key stakeholders.

How Can Public Engagement Promote Student Achievement?

In one report, superintendents and board presidents advised communities just convening public-engagement efforts to focus their planning efforts on student achievement (Wright and Saks 2000). Involving parents, teachers, members of the business community, and others in the process of identifying academic goals and standards and measures of progress can be a powerful vehicle for improving student achievement and influencing the direction and success of school programs.

Parents who understand and support educational standards will help their children meet these expectations. When the community supports the standards, it is more likely to provide the resources to meet them. "Accountability is essential in maintaining public confidence, and accountability begins with shared understanding of desired results" (Gemberling, Smith, and Villani 2000).

Public engagement also gives school systems and stakeholders the opportunity to learn about trends among youth and in the community that might influence academic outcomes. The entire community benefits from understanding social and health conditions that interfere with learning, such as teen pregnancy, inadequate nutrition, and lack of health care. In other words, public engagement can enhance the community's overall quality of life (Resnick).

What Is the Role of School Boards and District Officials in Public Engagement?

Student achievement—and community engagement that focuses on fostering achievement—is now recognized nationally as the primary agenda for boards of education. School boards are charged with the responsibility of creating conditions within their districts that will help students meet today's more rigorous knowledge and performance standards.

This role represents a dramatic shift in responsibility for school boards, which previously held oversight roles and served as passive reviewers of others' work performance. Now boards are expected to share the responsibility for how well students and schools perform (Gemberling, Smith, and Villani).

Although 78 percent of superintendents in a recent Public Agenda survey reported they have processes under way to encourage public engagement, only 41 percent say they actually solicit the input of the community prior to formulating policy. Only 4 percent of the superintendents viewed communication with the community as their most pressing concern. Superintendents "absolutely believe in the concept of public engagement... but when it comes to the execution as opposed to the intent, the reality is somewhat different," says Public Agenda's president, Deborah Wadsworth (Deily 2001).

Parents notice this discrepancy between intent and action. More than half the parents in an Education Commission of the States survey said they believe schools *in their community* have gotten off on the wrong track, and fewer than four in ten think local schools are headed in the right direction (in Solomon and Ferguson 1998).

If raising student achievement is a district goal, school boards and superintendents should begin by looking at whether their current processes actually summon the dispersed knowledge of the community. If processes are designed merely to endorse the status quo or influence a desired outcome, the goal of improving student achievement will probably fail. A school district should not simply view public engagement as one of its projects but as a way of doing business.

For example, a school system might realize that it needs public input to implement the district's goals for student achievement, such as improving state and district test scores, or raising graduation rates. Rather than hold a series of traditional forums such as school board meetings and public hearings on an as-needed basis, the district can initiate continuous methods of communication that sustain an ongoing connection with the public (Resnick).

Collaboration and participation are key elements in successful public-engagement efforts, what Anne Meek (1999) describes as "strategies that go beyond providing public information or ensuring good public relations, to promoting substantive, participatory roles for citizens in governance matters." Such efforts should be considered "a purposeful management tool," says L. Joan Brown (2001), whose definition of *community* includes all town government units, businesses, charitable organizations, and other groups interested in the economic and social well-being of the community.

What Is the Principal's Role in Public Engagement?

Principals play a key role in promoting community partnerships. Facilitating ongoing involvement with families, with a clear focus on improving student achievement, is perhaps the most critical step schools can

take to engage the community. Toward this end, the principal should let the staff know that family involvement is a high priority by providing them the time and resources and training on how to work with parents (National Association of Elementary School Principals 2001).

Principals can promote teacher commitment by stressing the benefits of parent involvement: When families are actively involved in schools, teachers learn more about the students in their class, and students are more able and willing to learn (NAESP).

Creating stronger ties with families is accomplished by keeping parents informed about their children's progress and what they are learning, explaining how they can help children budget their time for homework assignments, and describing ways they can assist them with their school work.

Involved families can effectively advocate for schools with the general public. In fact, informed parents are among the best ambassadors when it comes time for the community to vote on bond issues (NAESP). Only 24 percent of adults in the average community have children enrolled in community schools. Obviously, the support and positive votes of an entire community are critical to the passage of operating levies and school bond campaigns (Lyons 2001).

How Can Public Engagement Facilitate Student Success and Achievement?

Inviting parents, members of the business community, and service organizations to identify academic goals and standards and quantify measures of progress "sends the message that what students learn and how well they learn it isn't an issue just for teachers and administrators but is a real priority for the community as well" (Wright and Saks).

Five methods that help school boards and administrators engage the public are focus groups, telephone polling, public meetings, email, and study circles (Resnick).

Focus groups, which bring together a diverse group of ten to fifteen people to discuss a specific topic, can help school systems understand what issues they are facing. School officials can learn about hot issues that might derail a large public meeting. Focus groups also pinpoint key issues that will establish agendas for larger public forums.

Polling services are a relatively inexpensive way to engage the public. Although polling renders more superficial input than focus groups, it can give the school district an overview of the public's thinking. One advantage of poll questions is that they can be incorporated into the public-engagement process at any time. In the beginning they can be used to monitor public sentiment on education reform issues, and later, to gauge public understanding of and support for new curriculum development.

Public meetings provide an opportunity for diverse groups to talk about critical issues. These forums also give districts and the general public a chance to understand opposing sides of an issue, which can help to build consensus and create a sense of participatory government.

Email is a powerful, low-cost tool that can be used to connect school personnel with parents, business people, and other audiences. Email responses on issues cannot be considered a representative sample of opinions, but they are a convenient way to communicate with diverse audiences.

Study circles are a semistructured, multistep method that convenes policymakers and the public over extended periods in small-group discussions. More than 200 communities have used this method in the last decade to resolve issues ranging from education reform to racism. Policymakers say study circles give them the opportunity to understand a variety of perspectives about key issues and to receive a reality check on their policy direction (Rouk 2000).

How Can Schools Maintain the Long-Term Support of Key Stakeholders?

Leadership teams comprised of key stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and community members—can contribute continuity and stability to the public-engagement process. These teams should include people who have an institutional knowledge of the school district and who have access to top district leadership (Solomon and Ferguson).

Leadership teams monitor progress in reaching student goals and evaluate lessons learned from successes and failures. What differentiates this method from typical evaluation processes is that the teams do not wait until the end of the project but focus instead on continuous feedback.

To find out what's being said about their schools, districts might also seek out people who are willing to organize into special cadres. Cadre members should look for "a thousand little things done well" that can be included in district marketing and communication materials (Carroll 2001).

Board members and school leaders in one report made other recommendations for maintaining community support: Let the public know that district leadership is committed to public engagement; be clear about roles and responsibilities for maintaining communication; let the public know that their input makes a difference in outcomes; and keep all publics informed of the progress in strategic planning efforts (Wright and Saks).

Resources

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